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ABSTRACT

The relationships between parent and child verbal interaction and academic achievement were examined for at-risk adolescent Black males. The Verbal Interaction Questionnaire was used to measure student's perceptions of parental communication, and scores from the Stanford Achievement Test battery and school grades measured academic achievement. Students were identified as at risk by teachers using such factors as lack of motivation and poor academic performance. For this sample, no significant relationships were observed between the measure of parental verbal interaction and 11 measures of school achievement, even though other studies have identified significant correlations with academic achievement. Locus of control and self-esteem were significantly related to some of the measures of achievement. Three tables present study findings. (Contains 13 references.) (SLD)

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PARENTAL VERBAL INTERACTION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FOR AT-RISK ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES

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Parental Verbal Interaction and Academic Achievement

For At-risk Adolescent Black Males

Since the Nation at Risk report in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education), many authors have focused on numerous negative factors and conditions facing children and adolescence. For example, adolescence in the 1990s has been characterized as a period of great risk for healthy development and is unlike what parents and grandparents have experienced (Takanishi, 1993). With regards to mental health issues, Kazdin (1993) concluded, ". . . the scope of at-risk behaviors, adverse conditions and clinical dysfunctions among adolescents is enormous . . . " (p. 139). School failure or under achievement may co-occur with problems such as drugs, mental disorders and sexual activity (Takanishi, 1993). Negative educational outcomes have substantial social and economic costs on youth at-risk and its impact on society now and the future (Thornburg, Hoffman & Remeika, 1991). One prominent negative outcome is functional illiteracy and academic achievement in general. The educational at-risk symptoms are even more frequent among Black and minority youth (Thornburg et al., 1991).

Among the primary conditions that create risk are poverty and lack of family guidance (Thornburg et al, 1991). Not surprisingly, lower academic performance has been associated with neglect and physical maltreatment (Eckenrode, Laird & Doris, 1993).

The quality of parent-child communication is an important enabling factor for parent-child relationships. As an indicator of the extent of negative communication, Vissing, Straus, Gelles and Harrop, (1991) found 66% of the of 3346 parents interviewed using the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979) reported at least one incident during the past year of parental verbal/sympolic aggression with 12 to 17 year-old children. Parents also reported an average of about 11 incidences of verbal/symbolic aggression per year. Vissing and others (1991) concluded parental verbal/symbolic aggression is related to children's psychosocial problems such as aggression, delinquency and interpersonal problems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between parental verbal interaction and academic achievement for at-risk adolescent Black males. The Verbal Interaction Questionnaire (VIQ) developed by Blake (1991) was used to measure student's perceptions of parental communication. Scores from the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) battery and school grades were used to measure academic achievement.

Method

Junior high school teachers were asked to identify at-risk students based on characteristics such as lack of motivation and poor academic performance. Based upon teacher identification, 42 at-risk Black males in grades 6, 7 and 8 were administered the VIQ by the school counselor. The VIQ consists of 30-items with "often," "sometimes" or "never" to best describe the interaction between himself and his parent(s)/guardian(s). The possible scores range form zero (negative verbal interaction) to 90 (positive verbal interaction). Blake and Slate (1993) reported a coefficient alpha reliability of $r = .94$ for VIQ with a sample of 197 southern, rural,

predominantly White, male and female high school students. This reliability compares favorably to the parent-child verbal/symbolic aggression component of the Conflict Tactics Scales described by Straus (1979).

For all students in grades 6, 7, and 8, SAT scores for the same year were recorded from school records in reading, language, mathematics, science, social studies and battery composite. These SAT scores were converted to a common standard score distribution to reflect each student's relative standing in his class. School records yielded student grades in English, mathematics, science and social studies for the school year. These grades were averaged to produce a mean grade average.

Results

Verbal Interaction Questionnaire (VIQ)

For these Black males, the coefficient alpha reliability estimate for VIQ was $r = .859$, an internal consistency reliability estimate similar to the $r = .94$ reported by Blake and Slate (1993). The mean score on the VIQ was 63.76 ($s = 12.20$) and comparable to the mean score of 63.39 ($s = 18.21$) reported by Blake (1991). However, the median score of 63.17 with the study sample indicated the scores were nearly symmetrical, whereas the median score of 68 with the Blake (1991) sample indicated those scores were negatively skewed.

Academic Achievement

Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) and School Grades. Students' overall and content area SAT scores were converted to standard scores representing their relative standing in their classes. These converted scores were determined by obtaining the overall and content area SAT means and standard deviations for all junior high school students in grades 6, 7 and 8. Next, the scores of the at-risk students were converted to score distributions having a mean of 500 and standard deviation of 100. The re-normed SAT scores for the at-risk Black males appear in Table 1. The average SAT scores for these at-risk Black males generally fell .5 to .8 standard deviations below the mean of their junior high school classes. Table 1 also shows end-of-year school grades on a four-point scale for English, mathematics, science and social studies which ranged from 1.58 to 2.03 with an average grade of 1.85.

Relationship Between SAT Scores and School Grades. Unless indicated otherwise, all correlations reported in this study are significant at the .05 level of significance. The overall grade average correlated $r = .679$ with the SAT battery average. The correlations between grades and SAT scores in the four content areas were: English, $r = .380$; mathematics, $r = .447$; science, $r = .646$; social studies, $r = .446$.

Relationship Between VIQ and Academic Achievement. As shown in Table 2, VIQ was not significantly related to SAT battery or subtests in reading, language, mathematics, science, or social studies. The highest nonsignificant correlation was $r = -.148$ for language. Table 3 also reveals no significant relationships for VIQ with average school grade or individual grades in English, mathematics, science or social studies. The highest non-significant correlation was $r = .115$ for average grade.

Discussion

For the sample of at-risk adolescent Black males in this study, no significant relationships were observed between the measure of parental verbal interaction (VIQ) and 11 measures of school achievement. However, significant correlations with academic achievement have been previously observed for this group of at-risk students (Howerton, Enger, & Cobbs, 1993; Howerton, Enger, & Cobbs, 1992). As shown in Table 2, internal-external locus of control (NS-LOC, using the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children, Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) was significantly related to all six of standardized achievement measures. Also shown in Table 2, self-esteem (SEI, using the Coopersmith Self-esteem Inventory, Coopersmith, 1981) was significantly related to three of six standardized achievement measures. As shown in Table 3, NS-LOC and SEI were each significantly related to three of five grade measures.

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Table 1

SAT and School Grades for 42 At-risk Adolescent Black Males

SAT Test	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Battery Composite	422	105	40
Reading	421	108	41
Language	433	100	41
Mathematics	433	91	40
Science	446	105	41
Social Studies	426	102	41

School Grades	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Overall Average	1.85	.69	39
English	2.02	1.08	41
Mathematics	1.90	.97	41
Science	1.58	.87	40
Social Studies	2.03	.81	39

Table 2

Correlations of Verbal Interaction, Locus of Control, Self-Esteem, and Standardized Test Scores for 42 At-risk Adolescent Black Males

	Stanford Achievement Test					
	Battery	Reading	Language	Mathematics	Science	Social Studies
VIQ	-.061	-.019	-.148	.013	-.002	-.044
NS-LOC	-.461*	-.399*	-.375*	-.468*	-.337*	-.451*
SEI	.290*	.252	.236	.308*	.382*	.159

*p < .05

Table 3

Correlations of Verbal Interaction, Locus of Control, Self-Esteem, and School Grades for 42 At-risk Adolescent Black Males

	School Grades				
	Average	English	Mathematics	Science	Social Studies
VIQ	.115	.063	-.032	.053	.060
NS-LOC	-.330*	-.301*	-.063	-.410*	-.243
SEI	.426*	.309*	.190	.233	.334*

*p < .05